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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the education of mildly handicapped students who will be able to live and work independently, but who will be unable to profit from a traditional high school program, postsecondary vocational training, or college. Three types of mildly handicapped adolescents are considered--students who lack adequate basic academic skills in reading and math, those who fail to generalize or apply knowledge to their lives as adults, and students who can not even learn information by rote. Project Price, a competency based approach to Life Centered Career Education, is proposed as an educational method for teaching daily living skills, personal-social skills, occupational guidance and preparation skills, and academics. Also mentioned is the Adult Performance Level project which regards problem solving and interpersonal relations as skills to be taught directly with a curriculum that infuses academic skills into areas of knowledge necessary for independent living. (SB)

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The education of mildly handicapped adolescent/adult students: The infusion of academic and essential living skills

Presented by Dr. Marilyn Thypin

At the 60th Annual International Conference of the Council for Exceptional Children, Houston Texas, April, 1982.

Interest in programming for the mildly handicapped students at the secondary level has increased dramatically in the past few years. Tonight I will discuss the education for the mildly handicapped students who will be able to live and work independently, but who will be unable to profit from a traditional high school program, post-secondary vocational training or college.

Special education labors under too many myths. One myth is that special education at the elementary school level will "cure" the educational problems of the mildly handicapped. But it won't. The second myth is that the special educational category of students should determine the content of their education. Because of this myth, many mildly handicapped adolescents, especially the learning disabled and the emotionally disturbed, are exposed to the traditional high school curriculum with minor adjustments. However, this type of curriculum is inappropriate for many mildly handicapped adolescents, since it will not equip them to meet the demands of family, social and vocational living.

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We can't continue teaching the mildly handicapped adolescents as we have. We can not expose them to curriculums in traditional secondary level classrooms, or in self-contained special education classrooms which solely stress academics similar to elementary school programs. Both of such programs attempt to teach the development of skills. However, most often, these students can rarely generalize the content of either curriculum to adult living problems.

There are three types of mildly handicapped students. Some mildly handicapped students may have cognitive and linguistic skills appropriate for pursuit of a traditional high school education though they lack adequate basic academic skills in reading and math. For them, the traditional high school curriculum may be adjusted by minor changes in the presentation of the material, response requirement and/or level of content. Special education in resource rooms can teach them strategies for learning so they may better profit from the traditional high school curriculum. In teaching subject matters, such as general science, educators can teach these students in such a way as to stress the development of knowledge of specific facts and certain types of thinking skills. These students will be able to generalize and apply such knowledge from traditional high school courses to daily living and job-related problems when they are adults.

Traditional high school curriculum is not effective, however, for many mildly handicapped adolescents. Both the

second and third types of mildly handicapped adolescents lack age-appropriate academic, linguistic and cognitive skills. The second type of mildly handicapped student may gain some knowledge from the traditional high school curriculum to the extent that he or she might be able to repeat the facts verbatim on an exam or in a discussion, but such knowledge is merely abstract information for them. They can not generalize or apply this knowledge to their lives as adults. The third type of mildly handicapped adolescent can not even learn this information by rote.

The traditional high school curriculum will not equip the second and third types of mildly handicapped adolescent students to meet the demands of family, social and vocational living. At the beginning of their high school education the administrators must think beyond their special education category. The educators of these students must consider the present functioning skills of each student and his or her future needs. For them, the means of presentation and response are not the only part of the curriculum to be changed. The total content of the curriculum must be altered. Special educators of these populations must directly teach the information and thinking skills relevant to their students' survival as independent adults.

The content of the curriculum for them might well stem from the proposal for the career education of the retarded created by Project Price (Brolin & Kokaska, 1979) and the Adult

Performance Level project done in the field of adult illiteracy (Northcutt, 1974). Project Price proposes a competency based approach for the education of the mildly handicapped, called the Life Centered Career Education (Brolin, McKay & West, 1978). It consists of twenty two competencies for independent living. They are divided into three sets: daily living skills such as Buying and preparing food; personal-social skills such as Achieving independence; and occupational guidance and preparation skills such as Seeking, securing and maintaining employment.

Designating the personal-social skills as a set of competencies stresses their importance in the education of the mildly handicapped. Many of these students exhibit inadequate social skills and possess low self-esteem due in part to their inappropriate behavior. Without specific instruction in personal and social skills, they will not be able to function adequately as adults. Therefore, personal-social skills are an integral part of the curriculum, and must be taught directly in conjunction with the daily living and occupational skills.

The fourth set of competencies in Project Price is the academics. Although they are briefly cited as part of the competency Communicating adequately, educators must emphasize the academic competencies as supportive of the other three sets of competencies. For example, reading instruction ought not to include the reading of fiction; instead, it may include the reading of ads for apartments and announcements concerning

apartment maintenance as part of the competency Selecting, managing and maintaining a home. Filling out a job application may be taught as part of the competency Seeking securing and maintaining employment. Calculating a budget or charges in a restaurant may be part of various daily living skills.

This Life Centered Career Education proposal does not group the competencies into course offerings nor does it conceptualized them as being attainable only in segregated special education settings. Rather they may be integrated into the courses in special education and/or in the regular high school classes.

Educators of the mildly handicapped should seek the appropriate setting to attain these competencies. They must consider the content of the different curriculums and the capabilities of the particular students. For example, the vocational training program, designed to prepare skilled workers, may be not be appropriate for some mildly handicapped students. It may be beyond their capabilities. A program more appropriate for such students might well provide vocational training which is sufficient for less skilled entry level jobs. It would stress mastery of lower level skills, rather than exposure to many high level vocational skills but mastery of none of them.

Special educators of mildly handicapped adolescents must also look beyond special education. They should investigate current information from the field of adult illiteracy in

planning the education of the mildly handicapped. The Adult Performance Level project, for example, examined the literacy skills needed by normal adults for everyday living. It studied the miniumum level of literacy skills necessary for success in American society. These literacy skills were conceptualized as life competencies, and categorized into five general knowledge areas: consumer economics, occupational knowledge, community resources, health, and government and law. This project, geared to adult life competencies, resulted in the APL tests and accompanying texts which focus on literacy skills according to these general knowledge areas.

In addition, the Adult Performance Level project created a content by skills matrix which indicates the infusion of the academic skills into areas of knowledge necessary for independent living. Similar to Brolin's Project Price, the APL approach regards problem solving and interpersonal relations as skills to be taught directly just as reading, writing and math are taught directly as subject matters.

Moreover, this matrix stresses that skills can not be taught in isolation since adults do not exercise them for their own sake in isolation. Rather adults read an ad for a sale, write answers to questions on a job application, listen to the doctor, solve the problem of using the stamp machine in the post office, talk with hospital personnel and compute sales tax. Therefore, the curriculum for mildly handicapped adolescents, developed from the APL framework, would present

the academic skills in direct conjunction with the functional areas of knowledge.

Many mildly handicapped adolescents will become independent adults who will function slightly below "normal" though they may not easily be identified as "handicapped". Therefore, educators should prepare them to live as normally as possible. Career education curriculums form an appropriate mean of preparation. Project Price and the Adult Performance Level projects propose similar frameworks for a career education curriculum, These frameworks can suggest appropriate and attainable objectives for many mildly handicapped adolescents, so that they may then become the most productive citizens as possible.

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